



Vojin Bakic, Monument to the Revolution, Valjevo, Serbia, 1960. © Nenad Lajbenšperger, 2017.

On the wings of modernity: wwii memorials in Yugoslavia

BY VLADANA PUTNIK PRICA AND NENAD LAJBENŠPERGER

Memorial sites dedicated to the National Liberation War, revolution and the victims of fascism have played an important role in the cultural and political life of the socialist Yugoslavia. The changing political course of Yugoslavia from 1948 influenced its cultural strategy. This reflected the artists' sensibility and tendency towards abstract sculpture, which culminated during the 1960s and 1970s. In this essay we will examine the influx of modern art and architecture on the aesthetics of the memorials from the era. We will also focus on their contemporary representation as an important part of cultural heritage.

Introduction

Remembering and commemorating the victims of WWII played an important role in the cultural and political strategy of socialist Yugoslavia. The 1960s and 1970s were considered to be the "Golden Age" of the memorial sites and complexes dedicated to the victims of WWII, National Liberation Fight¹ and Revolution. After the abandonment of socialist realism, memorial sculpture was greatly influenced by the idea of constructing a specific Yugoslav identity. The war memorials of this period were characterized by monumental compositions, with an often geometrized form and an associative dimension. The depiction of martyrdom through an associative abstraction became a desirable form in which the war narrative would be most acceptable to the masses. Numerous memorial parks became places of mass gatherings for important dates or student excursions. Apart from mapping the memory on the events of war upon which the communist regime built their authority, memorials also had an educational purpose and nurtured the significance of the Anti-Fascist Movement, revolution, socialism and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia².

In this essay we will try to explain the complex relationship between memorial sculpture in socialist Yugoslavia and Modernism. We will also try to answer some of the questions regarding the status the monuments had during the past three decades, how the public focus shifted from acclamation to neglect and being ignored. Finally, we will address the issue of what their future might be now, after a certain time has passed.

From socialist realism to socialist Modernism

The first years after WWII were marked by the dominant socialist realism as a borrowed aesthetic model from the Soviet Union. However, the resolution of "Informbiro" in 1948 marked a break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet

bloc and its turning towards Western countries. Yugoslavia's new economic allies also had a cultural influence which became one of the key elements in the transformation of Yugoslav art in general. Socialist realism was left during the 1950s as an unpleasant episode and a brief digression in Yugoslav modernity.

In a secular society such as Yugoslavia was, the main goal in the culture of remembrance was to create spaces which could recreate a spiritual experience, but without any religious elements. Apart from the visual concept, almost all of the most important memorial sites consisted not only of a single monumental sculpture or a composition, but a carefully defined symbolic narrative which would lead the visitor through the entire epic history of the battle, or the tragic suffering of the victims of fascism. The narrative path often resembled a concept of pilgrimage, with the monumental sculptural form as the central culminating motif at the end of the "road". This conceptual approach pushed the boundaries of the traditional understanding of what a monument is and should represent. Since the soil where the soldiers or/and the civilians had lost their lives played a decisive role in the memorial culture of Yugoslav socialism, it was treated as such by the artists. The connection between the landscape and the sculpture can also be interpreted in the context of the land and environmental art which debuted on the world art scene in the mid-1960s.

The new term which was often used for the art of the post-1948 period was socialist aestheticism. The term was invented and defined by Sveta Lukić in 1963 and it referred to literature and other forms of art. However, today we can equally define the art of this period as socialist Modernism, especially when analyzing memorial sculpture. According to the art historian Jerko Denegri, the term socialist aestheticism implied neutrality, compromise, passivity and self-sufficiency, which could not be entirely applied to the memorials. The visual aesthetics of these memorials

were largely based on two pillars: the first is the heritage of interwar Modernism in Yugoslavia and the second one is the influence of international contemporary art and architecture. In 1953 a retrospective exhibition of Le Corbusier's work was touring Yugoslavia's cities. In 1956 an exhibition called *Contemporary Art in the USA* arrived in Belgrade. The event which especially marked a turning point in Yugoslav sculpture was the traveling exhibition of Henry Moore (1898-1986) in 1955. Henry Moore became an inspirational role model to many Yugoslav sculptors³. In the personal archive of Dušan Džamonja (1928-2009) there is a photograph of him with Henry Moore from 1976. Many authors found correlations with architectural movements of the post-war era, such as Brutalism and Structuralism⁴.

National competitions for monuments and memorial complexes enabled the breakthrough of the boldest artistically superior solutions. Therefore, the most eminent Yugoslav artists actively participated in the creation of new places of memory. Architects and sculptors such as Vojin Bakić (1915-1992), Dušan Džamonja, Bogdan Bogdanović (1922-2010) and Miodrag Živković (1928) determined the path of Yugoslav memorial sculpture, but also art and architecture. However, by analyzing the erected memorials of the period, it is apparent that the individual artistic approach varied from a strong associative abstraction to a pure abstract form.

Bogdan Bogdanović was one of the first artists who introduced a new design in memorial sculpture in 1952 with his monument dedicated to the Jewish victims of WWII at the Jewish Cemetery in Belgrade (figure 03). The path led towards the two symmetrical parts of the monument which represented the ten commandments or the pillars of the temple. Bogdanović also incorporated the material from the devastated and bombed Jewish houses during the war, and also the remains of the old Jewish tombstones. Throughout his successful career, Bogdanović designed eighteen memorial sites in five out of the six of Yugoslavia's Republics. The principles behind his work are based on rich complex repertoire of symbols, which were both primordial and futuristic, universal and eternal. As Vladimir Kulić stated, Bogdanović's monuments seemed to be more focused on the past than the future. One of the most elaborate examples of this iconography can be seen on the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar from 1965 (figure 01). Here Bogdanović used numerous geometric symbols for obtaining the universal message which overcomes the main narrative. In Mostar Bogdanović applied one of the characteristic approaches regarding the urban and landscape design of memorial sites, and that is the "pathway narrative principal", where the visitor is guided through a pathway through which he is being told a story about the events from the war, with a culminating motif at the end. The same principle was applied on numerous other memorial complexes by various artists, such as the Sutjeska memorial park from 1971 by Miodrag Živković or the Mrakovica memorial complex in Kozara from 1972 by Dušan Džamonja.

Miodrag Živković was another artist who always stayed on the border between figuration and abstraction. In

an interview with him he stated that, although he used different aesthetic approaches for different types of memorials, he always tried to depict the human figure⁵. In the case of one of his first memorials dedicated to the shot pupils and professors in Kragujevac from 1963 the figures of children emerge from the white concrete V-shaped form which represented an early ended life (figure 02). The subtle texture of the monument gives us the impression of a natural stone affected by the climate. In his later work, on the Monument to the Brave in Ostra, the Sutjeska memorial park and the Kadinjača memorial complex, Živković turned towards a more geometrized form of anthropomorphic structures. On the Kadinjača memorial the faces of the fallen partisans were depicted in two contrasting manners. The emerging heads in the first sculptural group are more rounded, while in the second and third group they are depicted in a very sharp, geometrized and almost cubist manner.

On the other hand, Dušan Džamonja's approach was more abstract. He used similar complex geometric solutions for his memorials as Miodrag Živković, but leaving out any indication of figuration. His most recognizable motif is "the Sun", a symbolic representation of life, which is present on his Monument to the Revolution in Moslavina in Podgarić from 1967 (figure 04). A similar relief called "the rosette" adorns the Youth Hall in Belgrade, also from 1967. Like Bogdanović and Živković, Džamonja used reinforced concrete and aluminum for his monument in Podgarić. The circular form is also visible in Džamonja's tower-like Monument on Kozara. The monument is vertically "sliced" and the entire composition consists of convex-concave and full-empty contrasts. The unity of sculpture, architecture and landscape have been especially well executed.

Finally, the artist whose impact can be easily measured in an international context is Vojin Bakić. His approach was oriented towards radical abstraction and he was defined by Ivica Župan as one of the artists who had a tendency towards a freer analytical intuition. Other critics saw him as a typical artist of high Modernism. Unlike many of his colleagues, Bakić preferred to use reflective materials such as stainless steel or inox to concrete, so that their surface could produce a certain optical visual effect. The process of purifying his monuments towards expressive abstraction first began with the monument to the Revolution in Valjevo in 1960 (essay cover)⁶. Bakić chose an iconic photograph of Stjepan Filipović just before he was hanged, where he rose both of his hands gripping his fists as a symbol of resistance. However, the monumental figure of Stjepan Filipović is not entirely realistic, on the contrary, it is reduced to a more geometrized sign. Bakić left only the necessary elements for us to recognize the iconic image. In his later monuments, the Monument to the Revolutionary Victory of the People of Slavonia in Kamenska from 1968 and the Petrova gora memorial complex from 1981, Bakić reduced the process to total abstraction.

None of the artists chosen to be presented and analyzed in this essay applied obvious symbols of communism in their work, but rather chose to tell a universal and eternal story

01 Bogdan Bogdanović, Partisan Memorial Cemetery, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1960-1965, an undated postcard. © The private collection of Vladana Putnik Prica.



02 Miodrag Živković, Monument to the shot pupils and professors, Kragujevac, Serbia, 1961-1963. © Vladana Putnik Prica, 2014.



03 Bogdan Bogdanović, Monument to the Jewish victims of the WWII, Belgrade, Serbia, 1952. © Vladana Putnik Prica, 2016.



04 Dušan Džamonja, Monument to the Revolution in Moslavina, Podgarić, Croatia, 1965-1967. © Alberto Campi, www.plus38.info, 2018.

about the struggle between good and evil, between life and death. They all used concrete as a very suitable material for large and statically challenging constructions, but also for its expressiveness. In some cases, like in the work of Vojin Bakić, the reinforced concrete construction would be covered with metal, aluminum, in order to create an effect of reflection, Bogdan Bogdanović also experimented with different materials, such as metal in the Memorial Cemetery of the War Victims in Sremska Mitrovica from 1960 or the Dudik memorial park in Vukovar from 1980.

Even though the memorial sculpture turned towards the path of abstract association, it is important to underline that it always remained within the ideological frame of the National Liberation Fight/War and Revolution. They were in the service of daily political needs of socialist Yugoslavia. The speeches of politicians at the opening ceremonies always referred to the actual political situations, both external and internal. Therefore their faith in the post-socialist period has been mostly problematic.

wwii memorials today and their preservation

After the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia, faith in the monuments varied depending on the Republic. During the civil wars a general rise of negative attitudes towards

socialist heritage was noticed. The pre-Yugoslav heritage was suddenly glorified unlike the recent Yugoslav one and many memorials became part of dissonant heritage. A significant number of memorials dedicated to WWII was destroyed during the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and some even after them), among which are monuments in Korenica, Kamenska, Makljen and Knin. In other former Republics most memorials were simply neglected and left to decay. Many of them have been vandalized by right-wing nationalist groups, but also by the dealers of secondary goods⁷. For example, the façade of the Petrova gora memorial complex has been mostly taken off by individuals for various reasons⁸.

In the former Yugoslavia, the institutions which were in charge of the preservation of historic monuments had partially recognized the memorials of WWII as a part of Yugoslavia's cultural heritage. The state's protection of cities and places related to WWII started very soon after the war. In the beginning, the state protected the sites, buildings and locations connected to WWII. This indicated the state's desire to maintain the memory of the partisans' fight during the war. Later on, the protection of monuments and memorial complexes started, but firstly those dedicated to the partisan fight. From the 1960s, monuments connected

to former concentration camps or places where war crimes against civilians happened also appeared on the lists of cultural heritage. A certain number of important memorials dedicated to soldiers and civilians who died during the war are still not under state protection as fixed cultural property. When monuments were put under state protection, two things were marked as important – the historical event that took place at the location, and the artistic value of the memorial. Many sites have been protected only after they had become memorial complexes by receiving a monumental memorial and accompanying content.

However, state protection does not necessarily mean that the monuments are protected from various forms of vandalism. Their current condition mostly depends on the attitude of the local community and the assertiveness of the institutions. In some areas there is a strong initiative and motivation for preserving the monuments and memorial complexes, for example in Užice in Serbia, where the Museum of Užice is successfully taking care of the Kadinjača memorial complex. Unfortunately, in some other areas there is no interest for preserving the monuments of WWII from the local authorities. These monuments are usually left to decay and oblivion, and the only activities which prevent that condition are the projects of nongovernmental organizations and informal groups. During the international project called *(In)appropriate Monuments*, groups of researchers made an effort to map all the memorial sights in the territory of the former Yugoslavia⁹. The fieldwork showed that the municipalities where the heritage of the National Liberation Fight and Revolution were still strong took good care of their memorials¹⁰.

Conclusion

Memorials erected during the period of socialist Yugoslavia represented a significant part of the state's official culture of remembrance and also of the historic narrative. When we compare the works of Bogdan Bogdanović, Vojin Bakić, Dušan Džamonja, Miodrag Živković and many other contemporary artists, we can conclude that what is common for all of them is the fact that they designed monuments for "eternity", as art historian Sanja Horvatinčić noted. Indeed, today we can say that the artistic impact of the memorials often overcomes their ideological dimension. Their presence asks the observer to admire them and interpret their abstraction on an individual level. Giulio Carlo Argan once noted that Dušan Džamonja's sculptures are monumental, regardless of their scale. This statement can be applied to most of the Yugoslav sculptors of the period.

The recent international focus on architecture and memorial sculpture of socialist Yugoslavia has proven to be a good stimulus for domestic historians, art historians and architects to revalorize socialist heritage and offer a new form of interpretation which would not be burdened by subjective political opinions.

Notes

- 1 Narodno-oslobodilačka borba (NOB).
- 2 Later called League of Communists of Yugoslavia.
- 3 Interview with Miodrag Živković, 14 December 2016.
- 4 A significant amount of research was conducted during the last several years on post-war architecture and sculpture both within the territory of the former Yugoslavia and in other countries by art historians, architects, historians, anthropologists, sociologists etc.
- 5 Multiple interviews with Miodrag Živković from 2012 to 2018.
- 6 The locals often call it the Monument to Stjepan Filipović due to the fact that he was depicted as a symbol of Revolution.
- 7 Several case studies of such forms of devastation were presented in a documentary by Irena Škorić called *Neželjena Baština* [unwanted heritage] from 2016.
- 8 Irena Škorić, *Neželjena baština*, 2016.
- 9 <https://inappropriatemonuments.org/spomeniki>, accessed on 24 May 2018.
- 10 Reports of researchers from 2017 (soon to be published).

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Vladana Putnik Prica

(b. Serbia, 1986). Art historian, researcher associate at the Art History Department, Faculty of Philosophy, University in Belgrade. Her field of research is the history of architecture in Serbia and the former Yugoslavia in the 20th century. She defended her PhD thesis *Architecture of Sokol Halls in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia* in 2014. She was the co-author of several exhibitions in Belgrade and other cities of the Balkan region. She has participated in international conferences and published articles in many distinguished scientific journals. She was a research fellow on the project *(In)appropriate Monuments* (2015-2017).

Nenad Lajbenšperger

(b. Serbia, 1979). Master historian, completed his undergraduate and master studies in history at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, where he currently attends doctoral studies. Since 2006 he has been employed in the Institute for Protection of Cultural Monuments of Serbia. He deals with research and protection of war time memorials and, in that area, he has published several papers. He was an associate in several activities related to the monuments and memory on the wars, and of their victims in the Balkan region, one of which was the project *(In)appropriate Monuments* (2015-2017).